"I was alw**ays looking at like Vogue..[I'd] be really good in the ad. world" Student Choice and Vocational Degrees**

Recent competition between British Universities foregrounds the importance of student decision-making, but there have been concerns about how students choose courses, for example based on perceived ease of acquiring the degree and a subsequent job (The Guardian, 2008). This invites a critical consideration of student choice and the implications for the sector.

Professional services may be 'hard' to choose rationally. Their intangibility means they cannot be trialled in advance, (Mazzarol, Soutar & Thein, 2000) producing risk and uncertainty, and it can be difficult to differentiate between providers (Freiden & Goldsmith, 1989). We may see this in HE. For example UCAS (2008) lists over 1500 marketing courses. The result is four themes that emerge from the services marketing literature to inform HE decision-making: heuristics and satisficing; attributes and tangible cues; feelings and emotional aspects, and; the importance of people.

Satisficing and heuristics reduce apparently similar options quickly based on key attributes. Turley & LeBlanc's (1993) research confirms that consumers seek to narrow their choice to a small number of options, or according to Zeithaml (1981:p188) they may satisfice by choosing the first 'acceptable' offer.

Turley & LeBlanc's research (1993) also found that a small number of evaluative criteria tend to be used, and research on university choice confirms the use of limited criteria such as course type, location, and league tables (Moogan, Baron & Harris,1999; Gatfield, Barker & Graham, 1999; James, 2001; Brooks, 2002; Briggs, 2006). Zeithaml, (1981) notes that for services quality might also be judged on available tangible elements, however, James (2001:p5) acknowledges a danger for education that open days can be "superficial" by focusing on the tangible e.g. facilities rather that the important elements of education that cannot be viewed.

Despite apparent rationality, others argue that feelings and emotional judgements are more significant in service choice (Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Crozier & Mclean, 1997) and when choosing universities, James (2001) and Reay, Davies, David & Ball (2001) note the importance of feelings and in particular a feeling of 'fitting in'.

This suggests a key role for 'other people' in service choice as both information sources and to help form judgements (Crane and Clarke, 1988). Because it is difficult to get a feel for services, people rely on the experiences of users (Friedman & Smith, 1993) and Brooks' research (2003, 2004) shows the importance of parents and other people in student university choice, for example.

All this highlights the need for HE institutions to provide effective and unbiased information, yet they have been criticised for focusing on the fun and lifestyle aspects of student life in their marketing efforts (Molesworth and Scullion, 2005) and Baldwin & James (2000) suggest that undergraduates are unclear about their educational choices, and don't know what to look for in H.E. It is within this context that we consider students' experiences of choice.

Methods

Much previous research on student choice adopts a quantitative methodology and has focused on

Australia or USA, or on non-traditional applicants (Reay *et al.*, 2001; Ball, Reay & David, 2002; Connor, 2001). Yet others (Ettenson & Turner, 1997; Lee & Marlow, 2003) have criticised quantitative methodologies, common in decision-making research, for limiting respondents to identifying 'single cues' (Ettenson & Turner, 1997). Such positivist approaches can lead to assumptions that student choice is rational, for example. So here we aim to unpack students' experiences using qualitative methods. Our sample is 21 new undergraduate students from a post 1992 university on the south coast of England studying marketing, and media related courses. These students have all gained better than average 'A' level grades, are predominantly white, middle class, and are from the south of England. The method adopted was phenomenological interviews that allowed the students to discuss areas they felt to be important to them and to tell the story of how they came to be at university in their own way.

Findings

It is perhaps significant that in the accounts that these students told us going to university was taken for granted, even amongst first generation students, and so the choice was only ever about what and where to study. None of these students told stories about their decision of whether to go. It seemed to have been made for them. One result is that students had only a vague idea about what a degree is, what studying for it involves, or even what the jobs related to their degree entail and even where individuals did have some sense of the academic demands of HE, they often rejected what might be considered a core aspect of the service offering in favour of peripheral parts. We might therefore be suspicious that the process of choice is not rational and we explore this by considering the decision-making process as described to us.

Choice based on current interests

For some students there was little indication of a prolonged and significant interest in the subject, rather choice seemed based on a limited reflection on current preferences at the time a decision was made. In addition, students often recalled that others had indicated this preference to them. Chloe notes that her art teacher highlighted the possibility of studying advertising: *"She said, 'have you ever thought about advertising?' - because I was always like, I was always looking at like Vogue,.. and I would always be like browsing - 'Well I think you'd be really good in the ad world.'*

For Chloe, this seems to solve the problem of degree choice by matching an interest with an area of study. Although we might consider vocational education as designed to lead to a job, other students indicated 'idealised' views of future careers, rather than an understanding of a job. Hayley explains why she chose media production, for example: *"Well if I enjoy the media, there's no reason why I can't have a career in it. I think my dream job is to have a job on 'Wish you Were Here' because I love travelling And I'm pretty passionate about travelling, I'd love to travel and I'm quite talkative as well, and I actually thought I could get paid to do both"*

For some an 'enjoyable' 'A' level subject formed the basis of a decision,
although often just one enjoyable part of the subject was identified so, for example English lead to choosing journalism. Alternatively part-time work was a source of understanding of a preferred subject, but again the problem of choice was solved by drawing from immediate experience. Leanne provides an example of her part-time job in a department store: *"I loved feeling like I knew a lot about what I was selling. And so I think marketing, initially when it was mentioned,*

was appealing to me because I thought: Ah marketing, I love marketing the products that I sell to my customers at the moment, and it's a course that uses the skills that I've already developed."

Elsewhere the desire to 'have fun' is identified and in particular this includes the rejection of academic content that is seen as difficult, so Lucy articulates her choice of degree based on avoiding essays: *"I'm not majorly academic. I will write an essay if I have to write an essay, I will read if I have to read, but it's not something that I strive to do[…] You have to work, its hard, but if you just do it when you get given it then most of the year, you get to run round with the cameras and have fun"*

So initial choice is based on a seemingly simplistic reliance on 'what I currently like doing', and what I want to avoid doing (academic work and maths in particular). The understanding of the subject or related industry seems limited. There is little evidence of a systematic search, but rather a limited internal search to find subjects and then possibly careers that 'seem like fun to me now'.

Making choice simple and deferring to others
Having chosen a broad subject area, the focus is then on a specific course and institution. At this stage, students seem to be looking for reasons to eliminate universities as well as to select them, for example, eliminating HEIs on the basis of their web site, their location, or their rank in the league tables. We also see a simplicity in the rules that students use, often based on conservative ideas about themselves. In particular location serves an important role in eliminating options. Duncan describes how he dismisses all northern universities for example: *"I'm not being snobby or upper class but I don't generally like up North. I'm not a very northern person, there's something that seems to be about up North that sort of scares me a little bit and makes me a bit insecure."*

Students also want to be 'sold to' by universities: *"they didn't really sell it as well"*, Chloe says as reason to reject one institution. And again students described looking for fun and enjoyment, often referred to as 'the experience': *"they don't advertise [it] as much fun, I don't think. It didn't seem as fun to go to the uni…"* Leanne explains.

After this often emotional 'elimination process' students may draw up a shortlist and may look more closely at the course, or take part in open day visits. At open days the appearance of the buildings and facilities were identified as important cues, but also the presentation by the institution and here students seemed to be seeking reasons to say 'yes'. We perhaps expected the students to seek out impartial information, but none of the students we spoke to expressed concern at possible bias in the presentations during open days and we noted that students may be happy to leave much of the information gathering and analysis to others, especially parents. For example Joanne notes the role of her father who came to the interview with her and asked about employment and drop out rates as part of his research: *"Well basically he made lots and lots of league tables and combining together in a spreadsheet […] So the university time tables, he linked them together, cross referenced them …and which is high, which is lowest and he printed out like reviews from like The Guardian… ….I guess he has far more pro-active than I was."*

However even at this stage some students demonstrated a surprising lack of concern, seemingly dismissing the need to visit universities. For example James told us this: *I'd kind of left it a little*

bit late in all honesty and then I didn't have time to [visit], because I'm quite busy with my various extra things that I do on the side, so I didn't really have time to visit too many."

Although most students highlighted the importance of the open day, some visited just one university and further explained that despite listing others on their application, they had really decided on just that one even before the visit. So students may quickly decide on a course and university from their short-list and then seek information that confirms this choice, often from the institution itself. Hayley illustrates this: *"I didn't do research as such, it was more, they made it kind of obvious they had a good reputation, because it kept coming up on UCAS as doing all the media courses. And I suppose you do look on the website a bit, I didn't do any in-depth research."*

Avoiding risk and seeking balance
Visits provided some with detailed information, yet we were surprised at how trusting students were and this suggests that as a service provider, HEIs are seen as providing impartial information. It is clear that just as students want promotional material to 'sell' them a course, they want to be 'seduced' at open days. Not only did we find that students were often quick to make a decision (and relieved when they had done so), but we also found that feelings and emotions were heavily relied on. So perceptions of staff might be significant. Joanne describes being put off going to one university: *"[the] lecturers were horrible.... they weren't very helpful at all........., they just stood at the front, did the lecture and then they were like 'Right goodbye'. They didn't seem friendly."*

Again, the picture is of inexperienced choosers lacking in ability or willingness to analyse the large amount of complex information and instead satisficing based on often peripheral information or limited experiences. This is also seen in what students told us about location. Chloe explains: *"Saying like that I fitted in isn't what I'm trying to say, but I felt, it was almost. It wasn't a home from home, but I felt comfortable, I thought, you know when you can see yourself somewhere."*

These feelings were used as a way of confirming a choice after a visit without further consideration, again 'feeling right' allowed students to convince themselves that the choice was now made, regardless of other available information. For many it was important to find somewhere 'safe', and again this meant somewhere familiar, including for some seeing 'people like me' at open days. A theme that emerged here was choice made on the basis of some safe middle ground. So students explained that they wanted somewhere far away enough to need to live away from home, but near enough to easily visit, and so not too big, but not too small (the university or town), and the university as not too 'academic', but not 'too easy'.

Conclusions
What might be assumed to be a highly rational decision is revealed to be less so in these accounts of choosing vocational degree courses, although some students do allow others to make more 'rational' evaluations on their behalf, deferring to teachers and parents, and to universities who should 'sell' courses. Expecting to be 'sold to' in particular seems like a consumer response to choice. Whilst the role of feelings in service decision-making, including HE, is well documented, it is perhaps surprising to note the extent to which this occurs for these students. Choice may be based on an ideal future job related to seemingly transient current media interests, (TV, film or

magazines), or a part time job. These decisions may be based on only limited understanding of what jobs might entail, and often actively reject ideas of intellectual engagement or development – something that might have been assumed to be at the heart of the HE service offering – in favour of ideas of 'a fun experience' and 'a job at the end of it'.

Satisficing is very apparent, with decisions also made on the basis of impressions or other people's views (but who have often little direct experience of the service). This can lead to a focus on peripheral aspects such as the town itself or the type of course as a way to reduce the cognitive effort of the complexity of so many courses and institutions. And this may also lead to a desire for 'safe' choice both with regard to location and course, often meaning a preference for 'people like me', and a desire to avoid subjects perceived as difficult. Students are actively looking for choices that are comfortable and familiar. In effect students desire degrees that might give access to idealised and often glamorous jobs, but that do not require complex or difficult study.

Marketised universities therefore seem caught between a need to recruit effectively, and a need to recruit responsibly. Assumptions that students may fully understand the vocational courses they have applied for may be unfounded, for example and students openly talk of 'less-academic' degrees as a synonym for 'vocational'. Yet if universities were to demystify the industries they face and emphasise academic rigour, some students could see this as negative. The implication of not doing this though is that HEIs may be colluding with students by appearing to provide 'easy' options that speak more to a teenage daydream than the sort of personal transformation and intellectual development that a degree may hope to be about. Worse, this may create a gap between promotion and actual experience, with students choosing courses that they think will be easy and fun only to find the reality different. At the heart of this problem is the fact that much of what we might assume to be core to a degree offering may be less important to some student-choosers.

Briggs (2006:p718) talks of the need for "quality information" which might lead to a "better 'connect' between student and institution/course". Yet students don't seem to want more of this sort of information and we note that the seductive approaches adopted by some HEIs may be considered to be 'good' marketing in that they are addressing exactly what these 'consumers' seem to crave. So we can't easily blame institutions for these approaches and currently there are no guidelines that might encourage or discourage specific marketing approaches. Perhaps there is a role for such guidance? We also don't know the degree to which similar processes take place for non-vocational subjects and older institutions, but it is disturbing to think we may actually have captured a broader student sentiment.

Finally we also note that in terms of services decision-making our observation that peripheral aspects may dominate decision-making may be similar for other complex decisions, especially when made for the first time and without the benefit of the personal experiences of others. As we move to a service economy, such insight may be significant.

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